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British Spy Hurt the U.S., Mrs. Thatcher Declares

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LONDON, Nov. 11 — Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher told an angry Parliament today that a Briton who confessed to passing secrets to the Soviet Union had damaged the security interests of the United States as well as those of the Atlantic alliance.

She said a full inquiry had been ordered into the case of Geoffrey Arthur Prime, who over many years had access to top-secret intelligence-gathering operations conducted by Britain and the United States. Mrs. Thatcher said that beyond examining details of the Prime case, and what information was passed to the Soviet Union, the investigation would look into ways to tighten security checks on Government workers who had access to secret information.

"It is not only British interests which have been damaged," Mrs. Thatcher told an unruly House of Commons. "The damage extends to the interests of the United States Government. And of course the damage to our own and United States interests is damage to the interests of the Atlantic alliance as a whole."

But she said that there was no evidence as yet that the spy, who helped translate and analyze Soviet transmissions on which the British and Americans eavesdropped, had been in a position to give Moscow classified information about nuclear weapons or other military secrets.

Seven Counts of Espionage

On Wednesday Mr. Prime was sentenced to 35 years in prison after pleading guilty to seven counts of espionage. He received another three years for sexual offenses against young girls, crimes that eventually led him to confess that he worked for the Russians.

The case has caused an outcry from the public and from politicians on all sides about the competence of the nation's security procedures. Since Mr. Prime is only the latest in a procession of Britons who have betrayed their country there is a growing sentiment that more stringent methods should be used to end Soviet penetration of British security operations.

There is a growing feeling here that the Government should ignore the opposition of civil libertarians and other groups and introduce the polygraph as a means of checking employees in sensitive security positions. This is the current practice in the United States and other Western countries.

Voices were also raised in the Commons today that Parliament should take a more direct hand in national security matters. A Labor member of the opposition, Ted Ledbitter, described the Prime case as a "disgraceful shambles" and called for "a purge" at the Government Communications Headquarters in Cheltenham, where the Russian-language expert was employed.

Inquiry Called Insufficient

Michael Foot, the Labor leader, and Dr. David Owen of the Social Democrats said another routine Government inquiry would not be sufficient to correct the nation's security problems.

Inquiries of this kind have followed most of Britain's major spy scandals. At about the time of Mr. Prime's arrest this spring the Government's security commission was reporting that circumstances in the past that allowed master spies to operate were unlikely to be repeated, and it called for a relaxation of rules that denied male homosexuals a security clearance.

Two months later the same commission was asked to look into the case of Comdr. Michael Trestrail, who resigned as head of security at Buckingham Palace after admitting a homosexual affair. The revelation came after a vagrant, Michael Fagin, slipped undetected into the palace and entered the Queen's bedroom. A report made to the Government has not yet made public.

In the public mind, British scandals, especially those involving treason, seem caught up in sexual misconduct. The question being asked here is how does the sexual misconduct of individu-

als in jobs with great responsibilities go unnoticed when a check on their private lives might betray aberrant personalities and character?

It was pointed out in Parliament today that Mr. Prime had been approved for security clearances and had survived "vettings," or reviews of his reliability, without suspicions having been raised.

Mrs. Thatcher said, "It is very difficult to get an absolute vetting process that can be proof against someone who is both skillful and determined to continue his work in absolute secrecy without methods of surveillance, and following so close, as to be almost repugnant to many people in this country."

Editorial comment in the British press said the Prime case revealed fundamental weaknesses in the nation's system of checking security risks.

"The security authorities can take no comfort from the fact that Prime was only picked up because of his sexual activities not because of his espionage operation," said The Times of London. "Indeed very few of Britain's postwar spies have been detected directly by the security services, rather than by accident (as in this case) or through tipoffs from elsewhere."

"In a sense — because of the muddle and the loose ends and the feeling of tortured inadequacy — Prime has no claim to join the exotic pantheon of master moles," said The Guardian. "But that perception, in fact, makes it all much, much worse for British security. If one is busted apart over a decade and a half by a mastermind, one may claim a little rueful sympathy. To be busted by Geoffrey Prime, breezing through two positive vettings, trekking home from work nightly weighed down by microfilms and cameras, has the same element of absurd humiliation that made Michael Fagin's palace forays such a wounding episode."